

Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Festschrift II in Honor of Julian Conrad
Juergensmeyer on the Occasion of His
Retirement: International Perspectives on Urban
Law & Policy*

Article 31

2020

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Recommended Citation

Tan, Kevin (2020) "The Business of Heritage in Singapore: Money, Politics & Identity," *Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 31, 586-606.
Available at: <https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/jculp/vol4/iss1/31>

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THE BUSINESS OF HERITAGE IN SINGAPORE: MONEY, POLITICS & IDENTITY

Kevin YL Tan¹

ABSTRACT

Singapore is one of the most rational and unsentimental places on earth. Its government prides itself on its pragmatic approach to policy-making, and is not afraid to slaughter sacred cows if they have to. This is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated by the radical modernization of Singapore's built environment through its various Master Plans and public housing programmes. This massive physical transformation is perhaps modern Singapore's most visible sign of progress. In such a milieu, 'heritage' is viewed more as a commodity to be bargained over than a common good in itself. The discussion over whether a building should be preserved or whether an artifact should be showcased hinges on its marginal utility to two overriding considerations – money and politics. The value of a building is not measured in the vague and unquantifiable terms of historical value or social memory, but in economically calculated utility and opportunity costs. While this model of decision-making may well result in the most rationale choices being made, it also leads to a feeling of alienation and the lack of identity Singaporeans feel for their land. This paper considers the place of heritage in Singapore from the time of its independence in 1965 to the present day and argues that hitherto, pecuniary and political imperatives have reduced the role of heritage in creating a national identity to a subsidiary one. It will also argue that unless this balance shifts to a more even keel, Singapore is in danger of losing both its heritage and its identity.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I am primarily concerned with how Singapore's built heritage has been determined by economic and political considerations and how this has affected Singaporeans' identity with their environment. I will argue that the rapid urban renewal of central Singapore in the 1960s has caused irreparable damage to our built heritage and environment, and that current efforts at conservation and preservation do not go far enough in anchoring Singaporeans to their land. More needs to be done if we are to use Singapore's built heritage to connect Singaporeans with the land of their birth as well as to continue to bind them emotionally with their land.

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THE PLACE OF 'PLACE' IN NATION-BUILDING

Geographers, historians and urban planners have long argued about the importance of place in the forging of identity, and the literature on this subject is both rich and varied.² 'Places' as opposed to mere 'spaces' are embedded with meanings by their users and inhabitants. As geographer David Lowenthal suggests:

We need the past, in any case, to cope with present landscapes. We selectively perceive what we are accustomed to seeing; features and patterns in the landscape make sense to us because we share a history with them. Every object, every grouping, every view is intelligible partly because we are already familiar with it, through our own past and through tales heard, books read, pictures viewed. We see things simultaneously as they are and as we viewed them before; previous experience suffuses all present perception. Each scene and object is invested with history of real or imagined involvements; their perceived identities stem from past acts and expectations. Without the past as tangible or remembered evidence we could not function.³

The stronger a person's affinity with a particular place, the stronger is his or her sense of belonging and ownership. For such an affinity and sense of belonging to develop, there must be key landmarks and symbols that link the individual to the land.⁴ These landmarks and symbols may take many forms – such as special occasions or festivals, ceremonies and rituals, food and handicrafts or memorable historical events – but is most tangible in the form of a city's built-heritage. It is the familiar landscapes and buildings of a city that distinguishes it physically from other cities around the world and these

² See for example, David Lowenthal, 'Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory' (1975) 65(1) *The Geographical Review* 1–36; Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2005); and Gillian Rose, 'Place and Identity: A Sense of Place' in Doreen Massey & Pat Jess (eds) *A Place in the World? Place, Cultures and Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 87–132. In the Singapore context, see Brenda Yeoh & Lily Kong, 'The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage in Singapore' (1996) 17(1) *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 52–65; and the essays in Brenda SA Yeoh & Lily Kong (eds), *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995).

³ David Lowenthal, 'Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory' (1975) 65(1) *Geographical review* 1–36, at 5–6.

⁴ See for example the effort of French historian Pierre Nora in his magisterial *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Arthur Goldhammer (trans), 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–1998).

buildings and neighbourhoods give a person the feeling that he or she is 'at home'.

One of the problems of the 1970s is how to convert a society of transient migrants into a community of permanent settlers. For well over 100 years, right up to the end of WWII, the bulk of our people did not regard themselves as a permanently settled community ... Singapore is now our permanent home. We must live and die here. This a fairly recent realization.⁵

To create a nation, two elements are necessary. The first is a common shared experience. This can take many forms, such as common suffering under the privations of war, or the fight against colonial subjugation, or the forging of a nascent army. The second is the sense of identity – of the people to their community and to their space – that sets them apart from others. A successful nation is bound by a shared cultural heritage engendering feelings of rootedness and belonging.

Forging a nation in a pluralistic post-colonial state like Singapore is especially difficult. For a start, the political campaign for independence through merger with the Federation of Malaya precluded the creation or fostering of a distinctly Singaporean identity.⁶ Furthermore, the only shared common past each ethnic community shared with the others was its colonial past; a past that emphasizes difference rather than commonalities; division rather than cohesion; conflict rather than cooperation. There was thus a need to find and emphasize greater commonalities in non-contentious arenas, such as in sport, food, the spoken patois, entertainment, and the built-environment. This paper focuses on the last of these.

Buildings and the built-environment create among its inhabitants, a sense of belonging and identity, even ownership. From a nation-building point of view, especially a city-state like Singapore, it is the singular feature that distinguishes one place from another. Typically, buildings outlast their architects and builders, and their permanence or at least lengthy survival suggests a certain immutability, transcendence, timelessness and continuity.

CLEARING SLUMS: THROWING THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATH WATER

The Urban Milieu

Over the past three decades, scholars, planners and civil activists have lamented the destruction of large swathes of habitat in our cities. In their efforts to renew and redevelop cities, urban planners have adopted an

⁵ *Petir*, April 1967, at 192–131.

⁶ See CM Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819–1988*, 2 ed (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989) at 292.

internationalized model of high-intensity, high-rise steel and glass edifices that cloak the world's cities with a pall of anonymity; victims of cultural globalization. Indeed, many modern-day cities lack individuality, distinctiveness and character; somewhat like the faceless shopping malls that dot the globe. As Anthony Tung, former New York City Landmarks Preservation Commissioner, declared:

The twentieth century was the century of destruction ... It was a century of dramatic urban expansion, improvement, and redefinition, but it was also a century when urban architecture culture was destroyed at a rate unmatched in human history.⁷

Singapore is a textbook example of this phenomenon. Over the past half century, the city of Singapore has been transformed beyond recognition. From a developmental and habitat perspective, it has been a spectacular achievement. In the 1950s, some 400,000 persons in Singapore – about a third of the population – were squatters, and of these, 240,000 lived in the city area.⁸ In 1962, some 750,000 of Singapore's 1.6 million residents (48%) lived in conditions that did not meet modern standards of hygiene and building safety.⁹ The conditions in the immediate post-War period were particularly appalling. As Teo & Savage described:

Inadequate housing conditions in the post-war period were manifested in two major distressing ways. There was the blight of the 'black holes' (the cubicles) of Chinatown, the slums in the Central Area, and the growth of squatter settlements around the city fringes. Moreover, the insanitary dwellings provided the breeding grounds for the spread of diseases, especially tuberculosis, and escape from many structures would have been almost impossible in the event of fire and related hazards....

The overcrowded and appalling conditions under which slum-dwellers lived were amply demonstrated in several social surveys conducted during the 1950s. With a population density of 50,000 persons per square kilometer in the city area in 1957, it is not uncommon to have a density of over 100 persons per shophouse. Surveys of low-income inhabitants in the Central Area and on Upper Nankin Street, a densely settled part of Chinatown, vividly depict the conditions of squalor. Over half of the residents lived in cubicles with an average size of about 9 square meters; a high proportion of these cubicles had

⁷ Anthony M Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 2001) at 15.

⁸ Ole Johan Dale, *Urban Planning in Singapore: The Transformation of a City* (Shah Alam: Oxford University Press, 1999) at 116.

⁹ Anthony M Tung, *supra* note 4 at 178.

no windows; sanitary conditions were deplorable and the buildings badly run down.¹⁰

The 1958 Master Plan & the PAP's Imperatives

Immediately after the War, the Housing Committee under the Chairmanship of CWA Sennett was established to study the problem of overcrowding in the city centre. It proposed that a Master Development Plan be drafted to deal with the 'haphazard and unplanned growth' of the city in which 'a generation has lived and grown under conditions which are detrimental to health and morals.'¹¹ The Committee further recommended that the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) be the vehicle to implement these proposals. It was not till 1955 that the first Master Plan was completed.¹² Among its key recommendations were:

(a) delimitation of the green belt around the city to prevent urban sprawl; (b) the decongestion of the Central City Area by moving one-sixth of the resident population to overcome existing densities of more than 2,500 persons per hectare; (c) the construction of three new towns, at Jurong, Woodlands, and Yio Chu Kang to effectuate planned decentralization; and (d) open space targets raising the existing ratio of 0.34 to 1.1 hectares per thousand population.¹³

Unfortunately, little could be done during the 1955 to 1958 period as Singapore faced one political crisis after another. These years were among the most turbulent in Singapore's history.¹⁴ Given these conditions, it was no surprise that one of the key priorities of the socialist People's Action Party (PAP) government that came to power in 1959 was the eradication of slums in Singapore and to build sufficient low-cost government housing to resettle those living in the overcrowded city centre. In many respects, the destruction and transformation of much of Singapore's urban landscape was motivated by

¹⁰ Teo Siew Eng & Victor R Savage, 'Singapore Landscape: A Historical Overview of Housing Image' in Ernest CT Chew & Edwin Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991) 312–338 at 325.

¹¹ Colony of Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee 1947* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1948) at 11.

¹² See Colony of Singapore, *Master Plan: Written Statement with Accompanying Maps* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1955–1958).

¹³ Ole Johan Dale, *Urban Planning in Singapore: The Transformation of a City* (Shah Alam: Oxford University Press, 1999) at 77.

¹⁴ See generally, John Drysdale, *Singapore: The Struggle for Success* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1984).

political considerations stemming from the socialist promises made by the PAP during the 1959 elections. Its manifesto, *The Tasks Ahead*,¹⁵ declared:

The organization of economic life must conform to the principles of justice to the end that it may secure a decent standard of living for every man and woman. The right to employment must be recognized by the state and the economic structure of the country must be such as to ensure that people are not subjected to the privations and degradations that go with unemployment. It should be the duty of the state to provide for the sick, for those who for one reason or another are unable to work, the young and the aged or those disabled through industrial injuries.

High on the PAP government's priority list was the need to provide adequate housing for the populace. The public housing programme was jump-started with the establishment of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960 to replace the moribund SIT, and the appointment of a highly-successful businessman, Lim Kim San,¹⁶ to head the Board as volunteer Chairman. The HDB's ambitious first Five-Year Plan (1960–1965) was to complete 50,000 units of low-cost, affordable public housing. The Board exceeded its target by 5,000 units and by 1965, 23% of Singapore's population lived in government flats.¹⁷ Between 1966 and 1971, the HDB built an average of 13,700 flats a year; and between 1972 and 1979 – the peak of HDB's productivity – an average of 27,000 flats a year.¹⁸ By 1980, 80% of Singapore's population lived in flats built by the HDB.

This highly-successful public housing programme was made possibly by the centralization of tremendous coercive power in the state through the

¹⁵ People's Action Party, *The Tasks Ahead: PAP's Five Year Plan 1959–1964*, Parts 1 & 2 (Singapore: PAP, 1959).

¹⁶ Lim Kim San (1916–2006) was Chairman of the HDB from 1960 to 1963 when he stepped down to contest elections as a PAP candidate. For his work at the HDB, Lim was awarded the Order of Temasek (Singapore's highest civilian honour) as well as the Magsaysay Award in 1962. During his career as a politician from 1963 to 1980, he served variously as Minister for Finance, Defence and National Development. He later served as Chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority and Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. See Lam Peng Er, 'The Organisational Utility Men: Toh Chin Chye and Lim Kim San' in Lam Peng Er & Kevin YL Tan (eds), *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999) 1–23.

¹⁷ On the role of the HDB in public housing see, Chua Beng Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997); Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarianism, Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995) ch 6; Aline Wong & Stephen HK Yeh (eds), *Housing a Nation: 25 Years of Public Housing in Singapore* (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1985).

¹⁸ These figures were calculated based on figures released in the *Annual Reports* of the Housing & Development for the years in question.

enactment of several important pieces of legislation, the most important of which was the Land Acquisition Act.¹⁹ Indeed, when Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia in August 1965, Singapore's Parliament deliberately omitted the importation of the constitutional right to property (formerly applicable to Singapore under Article 13 of the Federal Constitution)²⁰ in order that the Land Acquisition Act be passed constitutionally.²¹ Section 5 of the Act empowers the Government to acquire 'any particular land' for 'any public purpose' or 'any work or undertaking which, in the opinion of the Minister, is of public benefit or of public utility or in the public interest' or 'any residential, commercial or industrial purposes' for compensation that need not coincide with market rates.²² Speaking at the Second Reading of the Bill, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew outlined two broad principles guiding the Government in enacting the land acquisition law: (a) that no private landowner should benefit from development which had taken place at public expense; and (b) that the price paid on the acquisition for

¹⁹ Cap 152, Singapore Statutes.

²⁰ Article 13 was introduced into the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya when it became independent in 1957. The article, provides that 'No person shall be deprived of property save in accordance with law' and that 'No law shall provide for the compulsory acquisition or use of property without adequate compensation.' This provision was derived from a similar provision in the Indian Constitution and was recommended for inclusion in the Federation of Malaya Constitution by the Reid Commission. When Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, Article 13 of the Constitution automatically applied to Singapore.

²¹ The Singapore Government had studied the compulsory acquisition of land for development for some time. As early as 1920, the first land acquisition law was passed (the Straits Settlements Acquisition of Land for Public Purposes Ordinance, 1920, Act No XXIII of 1920). It was subsequently amended in 1946 and 1955, but these early powers of compulsory acquisition were limited and the Government was compelled to pay market prices for property to be acquired. The Government's main concern was with the adequacy and fairness of compensation rather than on coercive action. In 1955, internationally-renowned Australian land valuer, Dr JFN Murray was commissioned to 'ascertain the most practicable means of controlling land prices, and to draft legislation which would ensure that, in future community created values would be retained by all the people of the Colony.' (Colony of Singapore, *A Report on Control of Land Prices, Valuation and Compulsory Acquisition of Land* (Government Printing Office, 1954)). In this Report, Murray opined that legislative intervention was necessary to avert 'disastrous increases in land values' The resulting Land Acquisition (Temporary Provisions) Ordinance pegged the market value of land at 22 April 1955. Murray also argued that compulsory acquisition of land 'should be resorted to only when all possibility of obtaining land by agreement with an owner had ended, either because he was unwilling to sell or consistently asked too high a price.'

²² On the Land Acquisition Act generally, see See generally, TTB Koh, 'The Law of Compulsory Land Acquisition in Singapore' [1967] 2 MLJ ix; William JM Ricquier, 'Compulsory Purchase in Singapore' in Tsuyoshi Kotaka & David L Callies eds, *Taking Land: Compulsory Purchase and Regulation in Asian-Pacific Countries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002) 263–285; N Khublall, *Compulsory Land Acquisition – Singapore and Malaysia*, 2 ed (Singapore: Butterworths Asia, 1994); and Tan Sook Yee, *Principles of Singapore Land Law*, 2 ed (Singapore: Butterworths Asia, 2001) at 638–649.

public purposes should not be higher than what the land would have been worth had the Government not contemplated development generally in the area. Public development should not, he said, benefit the landowners but ‘benefit the community at large.’²³

At the same time, the Government introduced the Foreshores (Amendment) Bill to eliminate ‘the elaborate and lengthy procedure in connection with foreshore reclamation and in the assessment of claims for compensation in respect of such foreshore reclamation.’²⁴ The main provision in this Bill sought to repeal section 7 of the Foreshores Ordinance such that there ‘shall be no compensation as of right in respect of any land or any interest therein alleged to have been injuriously affected whether on account of loss of sea frontage or for any other reason by the execution of such reclamation works.’²⁵ The object of these two pieces of legislation was to ‘ensure, albeit imperfectly, that the increase in value of land, because of the increase in population and in development, should not lead to unjust or windfall gains by private landowners and speculators.’²⁶

Armed with these legislative enactments, the Government acquired huge tracts of land for housing and development.²⁷ Towards the end of the HDB’s first Five-Year Plan, the most serious congestions in housing had been eased and the Board could now apply its mind to the question of urban renewal and this led to the establishment of the Urban Renewal Unit (URU) within the HDB in 1964.²⁸ Beyond simply building more low-cost homes for the populace, the HDB was now looking into how to clear the slums and unsafe habitats in and around Singapore’s city centre. This was deemed necessary especially since the Master Plan committee noted that houses occupied by some 45,000 to 50,000 persons in the southern part and 30,000 to 35,000 in the north of the city and were ‘ripe for demolition’. Residences for an estimated 105,000 to 115,000 were noted to be ‘obsolete with limited life.’²⁹ By 1970, the HDB flat-building programme had succeeded in a

²³ Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates Official Reports 10 June 1964, at col 25.

²⁴ See speech of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, *ibid*, at col 31.

²⁵ *Ibid*. The Foreshores (Amendment) Ordinance No 2 of 1964.

²⁶ *Ibid*, at col 33.

²⁷ See generally, Teo Siew Eng & Victor R Savage, ‘Singapore Landscape: A Historical Overview of Housing Image’ in Ernest CT Chew & Edwin Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991) 312–338.

²⁸ See Dale, at 126. In 1966, the URU became the Urban Renewal Department (URD), and in 1974, by an Act of Parliament, was transformed into a statutory board known as the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

²⁹ See Boey Yut Mei, ‘Urban Conservation in Singapore’ in Belinda Yuen (ed), *Planning in Singapore: From Plan to Implementation* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Planners, 1998).

significant redistribution of Singapore's population. Even though the population had grown from 1.4 million to 2 million between 1957 and 1970, the population density in the Central Area was reduced from 360,000 to 241,300.³⁰

Urban Renewal and Conservation: Early Days

The PAP Government viewed the 1958 Master Plan as too conservative and passive as it was too accepting of the conditions of the early 1950s.³¹ In 1960, the Singapore government sought help from the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration to map out an urban renewal programme. In early 1962, Erik Lorange, a UN consultant in town planning arrived in Singapore and spent six months studying Singapore's problems. He recommended that the involvement of the private sector in urban renewal through the sale of sites within the Central Area on 99 year leases. In selling these sites, he recommended that the Government play a crucial role in guiding development and situating it within the larger comprehensive redevelopment plans.³²

The government accepted this recommendation and introduced the site sale scheme in 1967, with the first 14 sites sold by public tender in June that year. Most of this land had been compulsorily acquired by the Government and 'reparcelled and cleared and offered for tender with simulated designs or guide plans prepared for each site.'³³ The second and third batches of fourteen sites each were released in November 1968 and 1969 respectively, and out of these site sales rose numerous projects, ranging from office buildings to hotels, cinemas, shopping centres, car-park buildings, and apartments.³⁴ Through the site sales programme, the Government managed the location, pace and type of development in the Central Area and large parcels of land in the Shenton Way area were sold to create Singapore's modern financial district.³⁵

A second UN team arrived in Singapore in June 1963 to follow up and further develop Lorange's original recommendations. Among other things, the

³⁰ See Dale, at 127.

³¹ See Boey, at 134.

³² Dale, at 122.

³³ Dale, at 127.

³⁴ Dale, at 127.

³⁵ Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) at 204.

UN team – who issued its report³⁶ in November that year – was the again the wholesale demolition of large quarters of the city to minimize social upheaval and suffering but also to recognize ‘the value of working, and trading that produced this particularly Singaporean type of architecture.’³⁷ These particular recommendations were given token acknowledgement. Alan Choe, then head of URD, and Singapore’s Chief Planner opined that ‘Singapore does not have architectural monuments of international importance ... and therefore to preach urban renewal by conservation does not apply in the Singaporean context.’³⁸ Choe, like many other state functionaries saw urban renewal in terms of creating a modern city – complete with skyscrapers equipped with the latest amenities and facilities – by replacing the old. Many of the shophouses – hitherto the dominant built form in the Central Area – were seen as hovels of destitution and disease, to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. As Dale put it:

Many specific recommendations contained in the UN report have since been implemented. However, the recommendations, as well as part of the basic guiding principles, pertaining to conservation within the original city, was largely ignored. One of the reasons for this may be that both politicians and administrators alike tended to look upon the traditional shophouse areas as unbecoming of a new Singapore. Instead of being looked at as a potential asset, they were considered slums which had to be cleared and redeveloped.³⁹

Looking back years later, the lack of a coherent conservation policy was attributed to the pressing imperatives of development. In the words of Lim Chee Onn, former Chairman of the National Heritage Board:

There was simply no time to rearrange the furniture in the sitting room while pressing matters have to be attended to in the kitchen. Indeed on quite a number of occasions there were fires in the kitchen that had to be put out promptly. In the ’60s and ’70s it was not surprising that conservation did not feature highly, if at all, in our national agenda.⁴⁰

To be fair, the 1958 Master Plan did not recommend the wholesale destruction of the city centre but in fact proposed a list of 30 significant

³⁶ See Charles Abrams, *Growth and Urban Renewal in Singapore Report* (New York: United Nations Programme of Technical Assistance, Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, 1963).

³⁷ Dale, at 122.

³⁸ Alan Choe, ‘Urban Renewal’ in Ooi Jin Bee & Chiang Hai Ding (eds), *Modern Singapore* (Singapore: University of Singapore Press, 1969) 165–166.

³⁹ Dale, at 125.

⁴⁰ Singapore Heritage Society, *Roots: A Newsletter of the Singapore Heritage Society* (Singapore: SHS, 1993) at 2

buildings and structures to be preserved.⁴¹ Ironically, the 19th century bungalow at No. 3 Coleman Street – built by the great colonial architect GD Coleman as his personal residence in 1829, and one of the buildings earmarked for preservation – was bulldozed in 1970 in the name of ‘slum clearance’.⁴² The existence of slums and dilapidated housing was perceived as an eyesore and a sign of Singapore’s backwardness, and thus had either to be obliterated or obfuscated. Indeed, when Singapore won the honour to host to the first-ever Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held outside Britain in January 1971, massive efforts were made by the Government to erect decorative wooden fences and hoardings to block out squatter dwellings and *kampungs* or villages along the routes where the CHOGM delegates were most likely to travel through.

TOWARDS A HERITAGE POLICY

*Preservation, Tourism and Conservation: The Evolution of Two Regimes*⁴³

The Preservation of Monuments Board (1971)

The triumphalism of modernity and progress was so endemic and infectious that for the first five years of Singapore’s independence, few questioned the correctness and wisdom of the government’s urban renewal policy.⁴⁴ During this time, large neighbourhoods of shophouses were demolished to make way for development. The nation-wide celebration of Singapore’s 150th anniversary in 1969 offered Singaporeans a suitable opportunity to consider the meanings of its past to its present. Public concerns about Singapore’s past, and in particular the future of its built legacy began to be voiced in the local papers. On 21 February 1969, there appeared a short announcement in *The Straits Times* stating that ‘historians, architects and many others are expected to discuss the concept of creating a civic organization to preserve historic buildings and collect old material about Singapore.’⁴⁵ Alas, little more was said about this soon-to-be-formed civic

⁴¹ Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) at 256.

⁴² Perry, Kong & Yeoh, *ibid*, at 258.

⁴³ On the distinction between the two schemes see Brenda SA Yeoh & Shirlena Huang, ‘The Conservation-Redevelopment Dilemma in Singapore: The Case of the Kampong Glam Historic District’ (1996) 13(6) *Cities* 411–422 at 415–416.

⁴⁴ One significant group that constantly challenged the state’s urban planning efforts was the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), initiated by architect Lim Chong Keat and which grew to include many influential architects like William Lim, Tay Kheng Soon, Ho Pak Toe and Tan Jake Hooi as well as non-architects like Tommy Koh, Chan Heng Chee, Augustine Tan and Nalla Tan. On SPUR, see Dinesh Naidu, ‘SPUR: An Alternative Voice in Urban Planning’ in Constance Singam et al (eds), *Building Social Space in Singapore* (Singapore: Select Books, 2002) 61–68.

⁴⁵ *The Straits Times* 21 Feb 1969.

organization although it is possible that this new organization was being discussed by the Institute of Architects and the Historical Association who have been credited with mooted the idea for what became known as the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB).⁴⁶ Recent research has shown that the genesis for the PMB came from within the Government and was in fact mooted much earlier, in September 1967.⁴⁷ It would thus appear that concerns about the destruction of Singapore's built heritage came from both within and without the state.

The PMB was statutorily created at the end of 1970 by the passage of the Preservation of Monuments Act.⁴⁸ During the Second Reading of the Bill in November 1970, Minister for Law and National Development, EW Barker stated:

In this forward looking state of mind, and in our enthusiasm for urban renewal, we may wake up one day to find our historic monuments either bulldozed or crumbling to dust through neglect. As new Singapore is being built, we must not let the worthwhile part of older Singapore disappear...⁴⁹

Under section 5 of the Preservations of Monuments Board Act, the objects of the Board are stated as being:

- to preserve monuments of historic, traditional, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest;
- to protect and augment the amenities of such monuments;
- to stimulate public interest and support in the preservation of such monuments; and
- to take appropriate measures to preserve all records, documents and data relating to such monuments.

A 'monument' is defined as 'any building, structure or other erection, any memorial, place of interment or excavation or any part or remains of a monument'.⁵⁰ For a building or structure to gazette as a national monument, it must have 'historic, traditional, archaeological, architectural or artistic

⁴⁶ Perry, Kong & Yeoh, *ibid*, at 258.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Alvin Tan Peng Hong for sharing his research on the PMB files and materials for his MA thesis (for the National Institute of Education, NTU) on this subject.

⁴⁸ Cap 239, Singapore Statutes.

⁴⁹ Singapore Parliamentary Reports, 4 Nov 1970, col 337.

⁵⁰ Section 1.

interest'.⁵¹ Structurally, the PMB functioned as a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development and was thus seen as a sounding board for the Ministry on matters relating to the preservation of monuments and buildings. The Board was only empowered to make recommendations to the Minister on buildings to be preserved but had no power to require the Ministry to comply with its recommendations. In the first 8 years of its existence the Board succeeded in gazetting only 14 historic buildings, leading *The Straits Times* to lament editorially that 'no more than 14 historic buildings have been marked out for posterity' even though 'there must be, must have been more than 14 worth preserving.'⁵²

In 1974, when the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) replaced the Urban Renewal Department, the PMB was placed under the Authority and remained there for almost 20 years before being transferred to the Ministry of Information and the Arts in 1993 where it was placed under the purview of the newly-established National Heritage Board.

From 'Instant Asia' to 'Uniquely Singapore': Touristic Imperatives on Our Built Heritage

The Government's lukewarm attitude towards its old buildings and neighbourhoods changed dramatically in the early 1980s on account of two factors. The first was the feeling that rapid modernization and industrialization had turned Singapore into too 'Western' a society, and there was a need to reclaim our Asian identity and history. The second factor was more tangible. In 1983, Singapore experience a 3.5% first drop in visitor arrivals;⁵³ the first drop since independence.⁵⁴ There was a serious need to rethink Singapore as a tourist destination and attraction. Hitherto, Singapore had marketed itself as 'Instant Asia' promising visitors the opportunity of experiencing *all* of Asia in one place.⁵⁵ While such a marketing strategy worked fairly well in the 1960s and 1970s, it was blasé by the early 1980s. The hope that that the historic districts would 'change for the better and revitalize themselves instantly'⁵⁶ never materialized. The following year, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) established a Product Development Division and the Ministry

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The Straits Times 29 Sep 1978.

⁵³ See TC Chang, 'Heritage as Tourism Commodity: Traversing the Tourist-Local Divide' (1997) 18(1) *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 46–68, at 51.

⁵⁴ Indeed, tourism figures achieved only moderate growth rates from 1983 to 1987. See Chang, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ See Pamela Lee, *Singapore, Tourism and Me* (Singapore: Pamela Lee Pte Ltd, 2004) at 41; see also TC Chang, 'Local Uniqueness in the Global Village: Heritage Tourism in Singapore' (1999) 51(1) *Professional Geographer* 91–103, at 99.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

of Trade and Industry constituted a Tourism Task Force to map out a new strategy. The Task Force opined that in Singapore's efforts to build a 'modern metropolis', it had lost its 'Oriental mystique and charm best symbolized in old buildings, traditional activities and bustling road activities'.⁵⁷ The Task Force recommended the conservation of cultural areas and historic sites. These recommendations were later incorporated into the Tourism Product Development Plan of 1986.⁵⁸ Under the Plan, S\$500 million was set aside

For the development of *inter alia*, ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam; the Singapore River; a heritage Link which encompasses all historic buildings in the city area of colonial origin as well as specific projects such as the upgrading of Raffles Hotel (the *grande dame* or colonial hotels in Singapore); the redevelopment of Fort Canning (formerly a fort turned park, museum and arts centre); the restoration of Emerald Hill (a residential street distinguished for Peranakan architecture), and the re-creation of Bugis Street (formerly an open-air site famous for its raucous street life and local food which was recently demolished).⁵⁹

By this time, it was clear that the question of revenue loss from diminishing tourist arrivals was to be resolved at the highest levels of Government. In addition to commissioning the international consulting firm of Pannell Kerr Forster to prepare the Development Plan, the Government was prepared to invest heavily in making Singapore unique through the revitalization and restoration of its historic districts. The projected economic benefits were certainly enticing. The Pannell Kerr Foster team strongly recommended the conservation of historical and cultural features to provide a remarkable contrast to the urban setting of this dynamic commercial city/state. Conservation of the suggested areas will provide a focus of attractions which will bring to life the historical and cultural heritage of the nation.⁶⁰

Certainly, the projected financial benefits were expected to be substantial. The team opined:

The preliminary computations show that the enhancement of Chinatown and the Singapore River as historic preservation districts can increase potential occupancies of hotels by 369,000 room nights in 1988. The

⁵⁷ See Wong Kwei Chong, *Report of the Tourism Task Force* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1984) at 6.

⁵⁸ *Tourism Product Development Plan* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade & Industry, 1986).

⁵⁹ Brenda SA Yeoh & Shirlena Huang, 'The Conservation-Redevelopment Dilemma in Singapore: The Case of the Kampong Glam Historic District' (1996) 13(6) *Cities* 411–422 at 413–414.

⁶⁰ Pannell Kerr Foster *et al*, *Tourism Product Development Plan for Singapore* (Singapore: STPB, 1986) at 1–4, quoted in Dale, at 48.

impact on the Singapore economy in total expenditure would approximate \$70 million.⁶¹

After 15 years of unbridled demolition and rebuilding, Singapore's built heritage was beginning to be viewed as an important asset to be cherished, developed and exploited. As Dale points out:

While the old shophouse areas had previously been razed, they now became an asset. Studies on the tourism sector had clearly shown the vital need for the retention of historic areas. The planners in the URA and the PD had fought for a number of years to retain traditional shophouse areas for conservation. These were the focus of government attention, with most of the URA's energy channelled into preparation of guidelines for, control, and implementation of projects.

The problem with historical conservation is that it has become a sort of consumption good. The genuine historical and cultural value in terms of people and buildings is becoming subsidiary to the commercial needs of the tourist industry.

Singapore is very much a forward-thinking state, but there is an inherent danger in being too oriented towards the future. Singapore may have thrown away too much of its cultural heritage. The effort to re-create the atmosphere of the old Chinatown, for example, is a weak effort in recapturing the past for the sake of tourism. The result is a synthetic patchwork and 'gimmicks' that smack of artificiality. What is lost can sometimes never be regained.

To cast away the old and adopt the new is all very well but the sense of history must still prevail. Perhaps, this is what is still lacking in modern Singapore today: this sense of historical precedence and continuity.⁶²

The URA Conservation Master Plan (1986)

In tandem with moves by the STPB to market Singapore as a unique tourist destination with its own indigenous, home-grown attractions, the Urban Redevelopment Authority – which replaced the Urban Renewal Department in 1974 – began work on a Conservation Master Plan.⁶³ Commentators have questioned the primacy of tourism as the main reason for the Government's

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Dale, at 156.

⁶³ See generally, Sim Soo Lee, 'Urban Conservation Policy and the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage: The Case of Singapore' (1996) 13(6) *Cities* 399–409.

apparent *volte face* on its policy towards its built heritage.⁶⁴ The first detailed study for conservation commenced was revealed in 1984 for the conservation of Emerald Hill, a Peranakan residential street in the middle of town, just off Orchard Road.⁶⁵ In its 1985 Conservation Plan for Chinatown, the URA declared:

[F]or our city to be truly great, we cannot rely only on modern architecture, which is restrained by the economics of efficient construction, the use of new technology, and the pervasive international architectural style of the 20th century. It is inevitable that our new developments suffer the fate of looking like the new buildings in other cities of the world. The only way that gives our city a distinct personality is our historic past through the selective conservation of old districts and buildings.⁶⁶

In addition to Chinatown, detailed studies were made of two other ‘historic ethnic districts’ – Little India and Kampong Glam. The results of these studies were included in the URA’s Conservation Master Plan in December 1986.⁶⁷ The 1988 Master Plan for the Civic and Cultural District mapped out the development of the area into a major cultural, historical and retail centre as well as a place for national ceremonies and functions.⁶⁸ Manual and guidelines for the conservation of these ‘historic ethnic districts’ were also published in 1988 to educate owners and tenants of the historical character of the districts as well as strict stipulations on the building materials to be used, trades to be carried on and services to be provided, design characteristics of and time limits required to complete, the conservation areas.

By March 1989, ten areas were officially designated ‘conservation areas’. These were: Kreta Ayer, Bukit Pasoh, Telok Ayer, Tanjong Pagar, Little India, Kampong Glam, Boat Quay, Emerald Hill, Cairnhill and Clarke

⁶⁴ See for example, TC Chang, S Mine, D Fallon & C Pohlmann, ‘Urban Heritage Tourism: The Global-Local Nexus’ (1996) 23(2) *Annals of Tourism Research* 284–305; TC Chang, ‘From “Instant Asia” to “Multi-Faceted Jewel”’: Urban Imaging Strategy and Tourism Development in Singapore (1997) 18(6) *Urban Geography* 542–562; Brenda SA Yeoh & Shirlena Huang, ‘The Conservation-Redevelopment Dilemma in Singapore: The Case of the Kampong Glam Historic District’ (1996) 13(6) *Cities* 411–422; and Liu Thai Ker, ‘Singapore’s Experience in Conservation’ paper presented at the International Symposium on Preservation and Modernisation of Historic Cities, Beijing, China, 15–18 August 1990.

⁶⁵ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *URA Annual Report, 1983-1984*, (Singapore: URA, 1984) at 224.

⁶⁶ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Conservation within the Central Area with the Plan for Chinatown*, (Singapore: URA, 1985) at 1.

⁶⁷ Perry, Kong & Yeoh, *supra* note 5 at 262.

⁶⁸ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *URA Annual Report, 1987-1988*, (Singapore: URA, 1988) at 2 [hereinafter, ‘URAc’].

Quay.⁶⁹ In September 1991, the number of designated conservation areas doubled with the addition of Joo Chiat, Geylang, Jalan Besar, Blair Plain, River Valley, Beach Road, Bukit Pasoh Extension, Desker Road, Petain Road/Tyrwhitt Road and Race Course Road/Owen Road.⁷⁰

The Planning Act was amended in 1988 and 1990 to formalize URA's role in urban conservation. This included powers to identify buildings and areas of historical interest for conservation, preparing a conservation master plan, and guiding the conservation by the private and the public sectors. Under section 3 of the Act, 'conservation' is defined as 'the preservation, enhancement, or restoration of (a) the character or appearance of a conservation area; or (b) the trades, crafts, customs and other traditional activities carried on and in a conservation area'.

Ultimately Utilitarian

Till the mid 1980s, Singapore had no clear policy on its built heritage. Buildings were seen primarily as neutral functional assets whose worth was measured in their utility. If a building was dilapidated or broken down, it had to be repaired, but if the repairs were too costly, they should be replaced. It did not matter in this kind of an equation, whether the building was beautiful or not, or whether it had a historical significance. As a result, Singapore's urban development came at a very high cost. The modern metropolis, with its craning skyscrapers and mega-malls – all important and significant trappings of modernity – was built by beating the soul out of the city. As Tung put it, '[i]n the effort to secure a better future, Singapore cut out the heart of the historic city, eviscerating the cultural ambience from which its success had sprung.'⁷¹

The change in mindset in the 1980s was motivated by utilitarian and economic considerations. While there was a clear movement towards preserving some important facets of our built heritage in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially with the establishment of the Preservation of Monuments Board, these efforts and calls were given short shrift. It was not till the 1980s when a crisis erupted in the tourist industry ground that a serious rethink about the significance and economic importance of Singapore's built heritage was carried out. This attitude towards Singapore's past is nowhere more evident than in the tale told by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. He recalled his reaction when presented an economic report by the late Dr Albert Winsemius, economic advisor to the Singapore Government:

⁶⁹ Singapore Government Gazette, March 1989, at 2343.

⁷⁰ *Singapore Government Gazette*, September 1991, at 7025-7026.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, at 176.

When Winsemius presented his report to me in 1961, he laid two pre-conditions for Singapore's success: first, to eliminate the communists who made any economic progress impossible; second, not to remove the statue of Stamford Raffles.

To keep Raffles' statue was easy. My colleagues and I had no desire to rewrite the past and perpetuate ourselves by renaming streets or buildings after ourselves or putting our faces on postage stamps or currency notes.⁷²

By retaining Raffles' statue – and indeed erecting one more in 1972⁷³ – a vestige of Singapore's colonial past, the ever-pragmatic Singapore government clearly saw that while they needed to break with the colonial past to forge a nationalistically successful Singapore, they would not do so if continuity with the past in economic relations was jettisoned. Such a pragmatic and utilitarian perspective on built heritage leads ultimately to the commodification of history and our built-heritage and this presents many challenges.

THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE

The importance of Singapore's built heritage to its tourist industry has been a boon to preservation to conservation. Alas, this has led the Government to seriously reconsider its perspective on the utility of Singapore's built heritage in largely economic terms. The commodification of built heritage simply means that market forces will determine the survivability of any given building or neighbourhood. This problem is exacerbated by the need to constantly intensify land use to meet growing demands of an increasing population. Demand for residential and commercial space has already led to the massive transformation of what used to be familiar streets and places. The whole of Raffles Place has been transformed beyond recognition within a span of 20 years while newer areas, such as Orchard Road have been similarly altered. As Dale described:

The early 1980s saw exceptionally strong growth along Orchard Road strip. This was the result of the opening of several new shopping complexes. The completed net floor space increased from 150,000 square metres in 1979 to 295,000 square metres in 1986 and to 300,000 square metres in 1992. The competition and growth potential also led to the short life-cycle for the

⁷² See <<http://ourstory.asia1.com.sg/dream/lifeline/win4.html>> (accessed 2 Jan 2009); see also Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Edition, 2000) at 66–67.

⁷³ The original bronze Raffles statue cast by Thomas Woolner and was unveiled in 1887 and now stands in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall. The replica, made of poly-marble was unveiled at what is thought to be the original landing site of Raffles, in 1972.

pioneering developments of the 1950s. Cold Storage, Fitzpatrick, and CK Tang's old buildings were demolished and rebuilt.⁷⁴

The story of Orchard Road's transformation plays itself out again and again in various other forms, especially with each release of successive Master Plans by the URA every five years. In almost every new Master Plan, plot ratios are enhanced in various areas, and this presents building owners with the constant dilemma of deciding whether or not to keep a building or simply tear it down, rebuild it and sell it off for a huge profit. The recent enbloc sale phenomenon in 2006/2007 is a case in point. In April 2006, Beverley Mai, Singapore's oldest – and some might add, most stylish – condominium development was the subject of a collective sale. Hotel Properties Ltd paid S\$238 million for the property, giving each its 50 owners about S\$4.4 million for their apartments. This works out to almost twice what the units can sell for individually. With the increased plot ratio of 2.8, the new owners can build about 107 units averaging 2,000 sq ft each.⁷⁵

While collective sales certainly enrich owners of older properties and keep the property market buoyant, it also endangers a great many developments which are not gazetted for preservation or conservation. As such, the continued existence of these buildings, especially those built in the 1960s and 1970s, depend wholly on the historical consciousness of the owners. The Asia Life Insurance Building in Finlayson Green is a case in point. Although it is a very significant building, both historically and architecturally, it was not gazetted for conservation. When it was sold to Ascott Holdings, speculation was rife as to whether the beautiful art deco styled building by local architect Ng Keng Siang would be torn down. Thankfully, the new owners decided to restore the building and transform it into a suite of serviced apartments. Other significant buildings which were at risk on account of collective sales included Pearl Bank Apartments and Golden Mile Shopping Centre.

Challenges to the survivability of our built heritage also comes from infrastructural developments, such as roads and MRT stations. The beautiful Eu Court in Hill Street was lost to road widening, while the National Library in Stamford Road was demolished to make way for a traffic tunnel to straighten Stamford Road and smoothen traffic. Individual instances of buildings having been senselessly torn down abound and it is not the purpose of this paper to list them all. My point is simply this: Hitherto, economic imperatives trump historical considerations, and if we do not mitigate this

⁷⁴ Dale, at 212–213.

⁷⁵ 'HPL Bags Beverly Mai for \$238m' *Business Times* 27 Apr 2006.

somehow, then we risk losing more and more of our built heritage, if the price is right.

ENHANCING ROOTEDNESS THROUGH OUR BUILT HERITAGE

We also require more conscious and particular evidence of the past – features and structures we believe to be old, previous, or durable. The intimate continuity of past with present is a source of general comfort ...⁷⁶

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the Singapore government began rethinking its urban policy once more, especially since it sought to connect with, engage and embrace the numerous Singaporeans who work abroad or who have migrated. There was a need to forge fresh national identities in a globalised world where mobility is high, and where connections are far more transient. In a major speech on this issue, National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan said:

There needs to be a strong emotional attachment to Singapore itself, as a country, so that people will say – ‘I want to live here.’ ... One of the factors that holds a strong emotional attachment for us are the ‘places’ we experience and which we remember – whether it’s our childhood haunts, neighbourhood hangouts, or where we had a romantic first date. Such places are important ... because they cannot be duplicated in another city.⁷⁷

This tweaking of policy requires not only the conservation of selected areas or the preservation of selected monuments. It requires the preservation of a much more intangible quality – the sense of familiarity, distinctiveness and vibrancy of the community and its neighbourhood. In Concept Plan 2001, the dilemma between preserving Singapore’s built heritage and intensification of land use – characterized as ‘Identity versus Intensive Land Use’ – were highlighted and discussed. The findings of the focus group were translated into two new plans to guide review of Master Plan 2003 which focused on the ‘intangible’ aspects which make Singapore a distinctive and attractive place to live, work and play in ... a place we call home.⁷⁸ This resulted in two distinct plans: the Parks and Waterbodies Plan – to further enhance our green spaces, waterbodies and living environment; and the Identity Plan – to recognize, retain and enhance our identity and our built heritage.⁷⁹ While the URA

⁷⁶ Lowenthal, at 8.

⁷⁷ Neo Hui Min, ‘New Conservation and Identity Plans to Anchor Singaporeans’ *The Straits Times*, 8 Apr 2002.

⁷⁸ Urban Redevelopment Authority, ‘Making Singapore More Enjoyable and Memorable’ Speech by Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister of State for National Development, (2002) Sep/Oct *Skyline* 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

acknowledged that heritage conservation had to compete with development priorities, it adopted a more 'holistic conservation strategy that goes beyond physical structures by including communities and activities' in their conservation efforts. This approach acknowledges the importance of encompassing whole neighbourhoods, including modern and less historically significant architecture.

Will this scheme work to better anchor Singaporeans to their city? Will it engender the kind of warm, comforting familiarity that tells you that you are home? While many Singaporeans are ignorant of their historical pasts and roots, they are not without memory of their own life experiences and interactions. It is into this matrix that the state must tap if they are to imbue Singaporeans with a sense of belonging that will make them call Singapore their home.

And while much has been done to roll back the excesses of the 1960s, still more can be done. First, the public must be allowed to engage with its history and memories. They must feel that they have a stake in their environment and in their built heritage. There should not be a repeat of the failure to engage the public in the case of the National Theatre. In 1986, a decision was made to tear down the National Theatre, which was built in 1962 from funds collected from the public. No one was asked if more funds should be raised from the public to restore the theatre. Second, the conservation and preservation regimes need to be strengthened to (a) give the agencies greater powers and teeth to deal with infractions of the legislation; and (b) provide more funding to enable the agencies to subsidise owners of heritage properties who will not benefit from the windfall of collective sales or the like. Finally, a much more thorough study, involving the public and stakeholder groups like the Singapore Heritage Society, the Historic Architecture Rescue Plan (HARP) and the Nature Society, to identify important historical buildings and neighbourhoods for conservation.